

Pandemics

It is important that practices are prepared and are ready to manage a pandemic, if one were to occur.

Pandemic definition: A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. A flu pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus emerges for which people have little or no immunity, and for which there is no vaccine. The disease spreads easily person-to-person, causes serious illness, and can sweep across the country and around the world in a very short time. *Reference: World Health Organisation.*

RACGP 4th Edition Standards

- ¶ 5.3.3 Healthcare associated infections. Our practice has systems that minimise the risk of healthcare associated infections.
- ¶ 3.1.2E Our practice has a contingency plan for adverse and unexpected events such as natural disasters, **pandemic diseases** or the sudden, unexpected absence of clinical staff.

Assessment methods

- Interviews with GPs and practice staff

GPs and practice staff will be able to describe to surveyors how risk contingency plans and infection control processes might be used to manage a pandemic.

- Document review of practice procedures

The practice will have written procedures for the management of potential cross infections, as well as documented contingency plans to manage adverse and unexpected events, such as pandemic diseases.

Meeting the Standards

The first step in a practice's preparation is to identify the staff member who will be the key coordinator of pandemic planning activities and responsible for timely communication of all pandemic-related information to all staff. A team meeting should be scheduled to educate staff in the signs and symptoms of the pandemic disease, the differences between symptoms of the pandemic disease and similar illnesses, and the transmission and communicability of the pandemic disease. It is vital that staff are familiar with the practice's triage policies, and the key coordinator should ensure a specific triage policy is documented for the pandemic alert phase. This policy should be more detailed to handle pandemic disease symptoms, as opposed to the general triage policy.

Other factors to consider in regard to pandemics preparation and readiness include:

- infection control areas, such as:
 - taking additional precautions, for example, wearing personal protective equipment
 - hand hygiene and cough etiquette techniques
 - maintaining a clean practice environment
 - minimising waiting room items, such as children's toys
 - isolating patients who are suspected of being infected, or providing a home visit instead;
- communication strategies, such as signage alerting patients to pandemic phases and infection control techniques, and communication policies amongst the practice team, such as staff meetings or internal memos;
- immunisation and vaccination protocols;
- continuing operations, such as managing staff absenteeism, meeting other patients' needs and fulfilling ongoing business commitments;
- supporting each other, including the practice team supporting patients and the local community, as well as each other, in dealing with situations during a pandemic phase.

For more information, please refer to the RACGP's Pandemic Flu Kit,
<http://www.racgp.org.au/your-practice/business/tools/disaster/pandemics/>

Best practice

Ideally, each practice will have its own documented pandemic kit and all staff should be familiar with the kit and its processes. It is recommended that the practice's policies and procedures manual refer to the pandemic kit and its use also.